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OPERATIONAL LEADERSHIP AS PRACTICED BY FIELD MARSHAL ERWIN
ROMMELL DURING THE GERMAN CAMPAIGN IN NORTH AFRICA, 1941-1942:
SUCCESS OR FAILURE?

By

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A paper submitted to the Faculty of the Naval War College in partial satisfaction of the requirements of the Department of Joint Military Operations.

The contents of this paper reflect my own personal views and are not necessarily endorsed by the Naval War College or the Department of the Navy.

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ABSTRACT

OPERATIONAL LEADERSHIP AS PRACTICED BY FIELD MARSHAL ERWIN ROMMEL DURING THE GERMAN CAMPAIGN IN NORTH AFRICA, 1941-1942: SUCCESS OR FAILURE? by Commander Charles M. Gibson, U.S. Navy, 31 pages.

The Germans entered the North African theater to alleviate pressure on the Italians and prevent the collapse of the Italian Fascist regime. Rommel arrived in North Africa, and despite orders to establish a blocking force, immediately went on the offensive with the objective of forcing the Allies out of North Africa. After two years of fighting, Rommel and his forces were defeated.

This paper analyzes the operational leadership of Field Marshal Erwin Rommel during the North African campaign of 1941-1942. It concludes that Rommel, despite being an accomplished tactical leader, was a poor operational leader. Rommel lacked the proper personality, military education, and military experience to obtain the broad view necessary to become a successful operational leader. His personal relationship with Hitler put Rommel in a position of authority he was not qualified to fulfill. Additionally, his inability as an operational commander to fully comprehend logistics and strategic objectives resulted in the German's defeat in North Africa.

The Joint Force Commander must ensure his operational commanders are more than just tacticians. A successful tactical leader will not automatically become a successful operational leader. Close scrutiny of potential operational commanders is a must to ensure the future leaders of the U.S. military will be able to accomplish military strategic and operational objectives.

INTRODUCTION

"Cairo, 09 August, 1942: 'Rommel! Rommel!' fumed British Prime Minister Winston Churchill. What else matters but beating him!"

The desert wars of North Africa during World War II produced legends on both sides.

On the German side, Field Marshal Erwin Rommel was known for his outstanding war fighting prowess and was held in awe by the British. Rommel was sent to North Africa in 1941 to help relieve pressure on the decimated Italians.

Rommel's victories in the desert wars earned him the respect and admiration of both the Axis and Allies. However, in the end, Rommel's poor operational leadership resulted in the German's defeat in the North African Theater.

An operational leader is "responsible for accomplishing political and military strategic objectives assigned by the national or alliance/coalition through the application of operational art."² This paper will evaluate Rommel as an operational leader. His personality traits, military education, prior military experience, ability to translate strategic objectives into operational objectives, view on logistics, and command relationships all play an important role in defining his leadership abilities.

Rommel possessed many of the characteristics required to become a great operational leader. He was bold, creative, courageous, and had extensive professional military experience, yet he still failed as an operational leader. He lacked the ability to acquire the broad outlook required to effectively employ his forces to accomplish operational and strategic objectives. He frequently expressed the opinion that logistics were not his problem, and believed the strategic guidance he was given regarding North Africa was advisory in

nature. There is no doubt Rommel was a great tactician, but a great operational leader would have prevented, or at least delayed the German's departure from Africa.

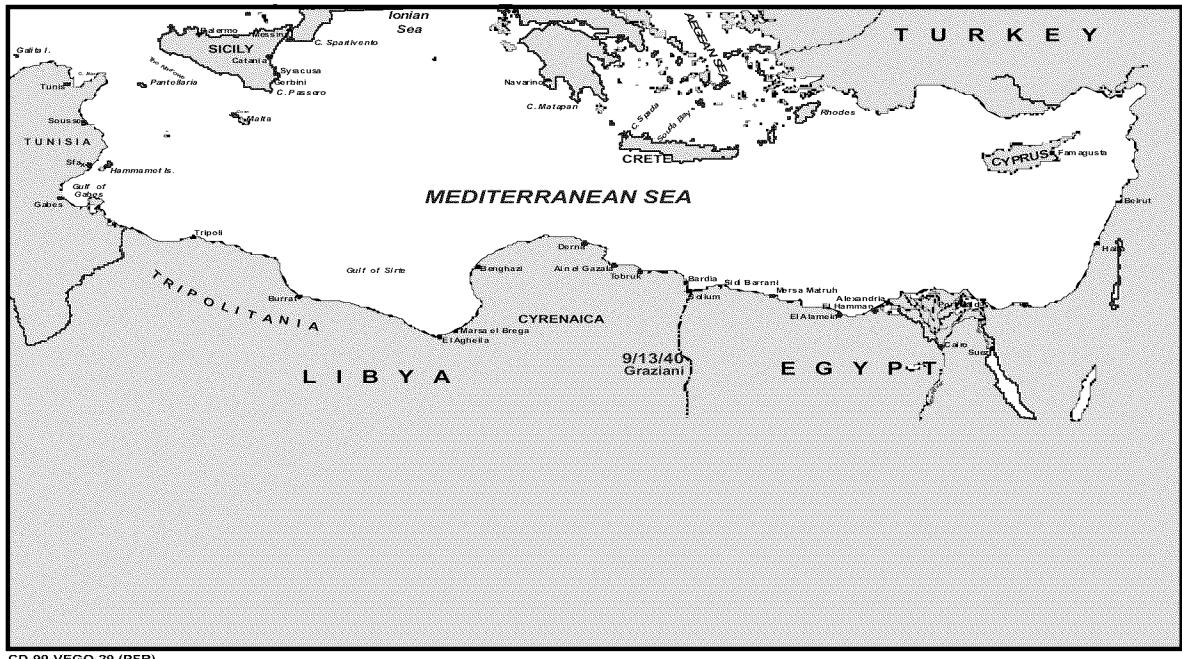
The Joint Force Commander must select operational commanders who can make the transition from the tactical to operational level. The operational leader must have the following: the proper personality and ability to work well with others, prior military experience, advanced military education, the ability to comprehend and implement operational functions, and the ability to translate strategic objectives into operational objectives. Although the Joint Force Commander may not always be the individual selecting his operational commanders, it is imperative for the Joint Force Commander to evaluate, and if necessary remove operational commanders that do not possess all the necessary qualities to become a successful operational leader.

North African Campaign Overview

In 1940, British forces quickly decimated the Italians in North Africa. In ten weeks the British destroyed ten divisions, captured 130,000 prisoners and 400 tanks, and advanced over 500 miles.³ The British were unable to completely drive the Italians out of Africa due to the diversion of British troops to Greece, and delays in regrouping and resupplying.⁴

Hitler felt it was important to prevent the collapse of the Italian Fascist Regime, which might lead to a separate peace for the Italians. He did not view North Africa as militarily significant; his major goal was to keep the Italians in the war. Hitler informed Rommel that the main purpose of his mission was to defend Tripolitania from further British incursions; an additional theater of war was not desired.⁵ Rommel seemed like the natural choice for the

autonomous operation in Africa; he had previously demonstrated his ability in semi-independent operations and his tactical skills were a known quantity.⁶



North African Theater

(source: Prof Milan Vego)

Rommel, sent to Africa to command the Afrika Korps, immediately went on the offensive. A noted historian wrote: "Hitler intended Afrika Korps to be a stone wall: Rommel made it an avalanche, moving under laws of its own."⁷ Rommel perceived a weak Allied presence, and saw a great opportunity to exploit it. In April 1941, Rommel quickly turned a probing attack into a full-scale assault, and drove the British back towards the Egyptian border. This successful performance surprised both the British and Germans. Rommel then laid siege to the fortress of Tobruk, but could not capture it (see map A-1).⁸

In June 1941, the British unsuccessfully attempted to destroy the Afrika Korps's panzers and relieve Tobruk during an operation named Battleaxe. In November 1941, the British began

Operation Crusade, another attempt to destroy Axis armor and relieve pressure on Tobruk. The British achieved surprise and had enough tanks and troops to destroy the Afrika Korps, but had tactical breakdowns that prevented victory (see map A-2).⁹ Meanwhile, believing a decisive victory had been won, and only the ineffective remnants of the British forces were retreating, Rommel made a mad dash to Egypt to destroy British supply lines (see map A-3). Rommel's mad dash was unsuccessful, and on 06 December 1941, the Afrika Korps retreated towards the Gazala line. In January 1942, Rommel's retreat continued, and a defensive line was established at El Agheila (see map A-4).¹⁰

On January 20 1942, Rommel once again took the offensive. The British were caught off guard and quickly retreated; Rommel used captured Allied supplies to continue his attacks. By the end of January, the Axis had recaptured Benghazi (see map A-5). During the next four months both sides made preparations for the next battle.¹¹

Rommel felt compelled to act before the Allies had re-supplied and become too strong. In May 1942, Rommel's forces resumed the offensive and finally captured the fortress at Tobruk. Rommel chased the retreating British in pursuit of a decisive victory in North Africa. With Rommel's supply lines over 1000 miles long, his forces were not strong enough to defeat the British, and by July 1942, Rommel halted his attack. In August, after rearming and refitting, Rommel attempted to break the British line, but he ran into a force much larger and better equipped than anticipated (see map A-6). Rommel's desperate attempt to drive the British out of North Africa had failed.¹²

By October 1942, the British were on the offensive. Rommel had reached his culmination point by overextending his supply lines. Rommel and his forces fought a war of attrition before beginning their long retreat westward (see map A-7). Rommel was never able to

conquer North Africa. Why did Rommel fail? We need to examine Rommel's operational leadership shortcomings to gain insight into the German's defeat in North Africa.

Personality Traits

The operational commander should possess high intellect, creativity, boldness, courage, strength of character, experience, and excellent professional knowledge.¹³ Rommel developed many of these traits, but failed to become a good operational leader.

Rommel's beginnings did not point to a successful military career. His family, with the exception of his father's brief stint in an artillery unit, did not have a military history.

Rommel's early years were characterized by laziness and disinterest.¹⁴ However, by his teens he improved his academics and physical conditioning. He enlisted in the military in 1910, and in 1911 he attended The War Academy at Danzig to begin officer training.

Academics remained a challenge for Rommel, but the soldiering came easier to him.¹⁵

Although not known for his high intellect, in 1913, Rommel's commanding officer praised his "strong character, great will-power, and zeal."¹⁶ Rommel's experiences during World War I helped define his character. Brigadier Desmond Young wrote: "From the moment that he first came under fire he stood out as the perfect fighting animal, cold, cunning, ruthless, untiring, quick of decision, incredibly brave."¹⁷

Several of Rommel's exploits in World War I proved that Rommel was creative, courageous, determined, and impulsive. He preferred to use surprise and always be on the offensive. Rommel was awarded the Iron Cross in 1915 for his daring adventures against the French. After leaving the relative safety of the trenches, Rommel advanced his troops toward the enemy. His crawling troops suddenly came under heavy fire. Rommel decided to

continue the attack, rather than retreat. Rommel wrote, "In spite of the undiminished volume of fire directed at us, the 9th Company jumped up, cheering lustily, dashed forward."¹⁸ The enemy rapidly abandoned his strong position.¹⁹

During World War I, Rommel was often overly ambitious and was excessive in the expenditure of men and material.²⁰ Rommel displayed the same aggressive behavior during the early stages of World War II. While commanding the 7th Panzer Division in France, Rommel's behavior came into question several times. But his tremendous victories prevented much scrutiny of his conduct. Excessive aggressiveness and ambition at the tactical level may be costly, but generally will not jeopardize an entire operation or campaign. However, excessive aggressiveness and ambition at the operational level may put an entire campaign in jeopardy. Rommel's excessive behavior at the tactical level was not questioned because he was successful; although, a weak enemy and the fog of war also contributed to his many tactical victories.

Rommel's overzealous, aggressive attitude was displayed almost immediately upon his arrival in North Africa. He went on the offensive despite orders to the contrary. His aggressive, impulsive behavior proved to be his downfall in North Africa. He was supposed to establish a blocking force, but instead spent two years aggressively pursuing the destruction of the British. After initial successes, the tide of events changed and Rommel was soundly defeated and driven out of North Africa.

Military Education

Following World War I, the Germans were limited to 4000 officers. Rommel's noteworthy exploits in World War I helped ensure he had a billet in Germany's postwar

Army. During the postwar years, Rommel was not recruited to the General Staff, nor did he attend the War Academy.²¹ This occurred despite the fact that a majority of the retained front line officers with the Iron Cross and without prior leadership training were transferred to the General Staff.²² Rommel sensed an undeserved exclusion. Rommel felt the General Staff members were remote and over-intelligent.²³ Rommel spent the first nine years of his inter-war years performing regimental duty, then in 1929 he became an instructor at the Infantry school in Dresden teaching infantry tactics. During his time at the Infantry school, he published his book *Infanterie Greift An (Infantry Attack)* based on his lectures and personal experiences in Belgium, the Argonne, the Vosges, the Carpathians, and Italy during World War I.²⁴

Following the command of an infantry battalion, Rommel was assigned to the War Academy in Potsdam in 1935. He became an instructor at this prestigious school even though he had never attended it as a student. In 1938 Rommel was appointed the Commandant of the War Academy at Wiener Neustadt, where junior officers were taught minor tactics.²⁵

It's interesting to note that Rommel never received any intermediate or advanced level education, and except for a brief stint on a corps staff at the end of World War I, he never served in a division or higher headquarters until commanding the 7th Panzer division in 1940.²⁶ While Operational Art was not used as a formal doctrine by the Germans in World War II, it was a known concept whose practice was limited to general staff trained officers.²⁷ “General staff training and service had at its core a commitment to knowledge, logic, detailed analysis and a shared, almost interchangeable approach.”²⁸ Rommel’s recklessness and dynamism often were in contrast to his peers’ more disciplined approach.²⁹

Rommel's view of war, with a lack of emphasis on planning and details, was diametrically opposed. Rommel felt that battle did not necessarily have to emerge from strategy; battle could lead to strategy.³⁰

Rommel was not a well-educated staff officer. His military education consisted of combat in World War I, self-study, and the teaching of tactics. His book, *Infanterie Greift An*, was written at the tactical level. From an educational standpoint, Rommel was a well-qualified tactical leader, but unprepared for the demands of operational leadership.

Prior Military Experience

It is only natural that Rommel's military experiences in World War I would have a profound effect on the way he thought and acted in World War II. Rommel's first encounter with the enemy in World War I occurred during a reconnaissance mission with three of his soldiers. His small group came upon fifteen to twenty Frenchmen who were standing around drinking coffee. Rommel decided not to send back for his platoon; he and his patrol opened fire and immediately took out about half the Frenchmen. Rommel and his soldiers had to retreat when they received returning fire from surrounding areas.³¹ “He had shown a typical audacity – a readiness to act rather than wait, to attack at once and in person rather than make a prudent plan and form up appropriate forces.”³²

Although engaged in trench warfare during the early stages of World War I, the majority of his actions during the later years of the war were often far removed from trench warfare. In 1916, Rommel was assigned company commander in a mountain regiment that saw action in Rumania, Italy, and France. Rommel and his company were involved in maneuver type warfare where they engaged the enemy during raids that utilized surprise, stealth, guile, and

the utilization of intensive fire support.³³ Rommel's experiences during World War I taught him that maneuver was important and one should never hesitate to attack. His experiences led him to value the importance of the following principles: reconnaissance, surprise, and deception and diversion of the enemy.³⁴ Rommel also believed that "the exploitation of sudden successes, even when it means disobeying orders, can lead to greater successes."³⁵

During the early stages of World War II, after serving on Hitler's staff, Rommel took command of the 7th Panzer division. He participated in blitzkrieg campaigns in France and Belgium. Rommel displayed the same daring, aggressive attitude he displayed during his World War I exploits. His success culminated with the capture of Cherbourg in June 1940. However, there were some reservations about the way Rommel employed his division. Rommel would often get well ahead of other divisions. Additionally, he let his panzer units get too far ahead of his infantry, leaving them vulnerable. Rommel's corps and army commanders felt he was too impulsive. They also noted that he minimized the roles played by other divisions and the Luftwaffe.³⁶ At one point Rommel's aggressiveness and risk taking even alarmed his own chief of operations.³⁷

Rommel's World War I and early World War II experiences showed that he was an excellent tactical leader. He was a bold, courageous leader who liked to utilize maneuver and surprise. Rommel was offense oriented. However, there were signs that Rommel might be too aggressive and ambitious. In World War I he often outran his support elements and lost contact with the follow-on forces. In the early stages of World War II Rommel once again displayed signs of over-aggressiveness. In North Africa, Rommel employed the same warfare techniques that lead to his many successes during World War I and the early stages of World War II. However, the aggressive, impulsive behavior that yielded victories at the

tactical level did not always produce success at the operational level. Rommel, as an operational leader in North Africa, now had to concern himself with such things as strategy, logistics, and sequencing. His prior military experience indicated that he was not inclined to worry about such matters. Instead, he was prone to swiftly strike at the enemy in hopes of a quick victory. This mentality led to the pursuit of an unattainable goal of driving the British and her Allies out of North Africa.

Strategic Objectives

Clausewitz writes that the reason for war "always lies in some political situation, and the occasion is always due to some political object. War, therefore is an act of policy."³⁸ Hitler's policy in North Africa was to bolster Italian forces and contain the British. The German strategy was to establish a blocking force; it was envisioned as defensive in nature. A successful operational leader must be able to understand and follow strategic guidance. Rommel received his marching orders from Berlin, and they stated he was to hold Libya and not exceed an operational depth of 300 miles.³⁹ Rommel was never able to accept that the objective in North Africa was simply to prevent further British incursions. He was used to being on the offensive, and therefore had different plans for his forces. After initially assessing the situation in Africa, Rommel went back to Germany to seek additional reinforcements and permission to conduct offensive operations. The Army High Command and the German High Command denied his request. He was told his forces were only in Africa to sustain Italian morale and prevent British gains.⁴⁰ Undeterred, and applying the principle that it is better to ask forgiveness than to seek permission, Rommel launched an offensive campaign upon his return to Africa, surprising both the British and the Germans.

Rommel's outstanding success prevented scrutiny of his actions and paved the way for his future operations.

When Rommel arrived in North Africa, he was nominally under Italian command. However, Rommel immediately took control of his own destiny. Rommel's goal in North Africa far exceeded the limited strategic goals laid out for him by German higher authority. Rommel was logically supplied based on the strategic goals set forth by Hitler.

Rommel never had an operational or campaign plan with obtainable goals. He proceeded to engage in a series of battles that were not phased or sequenced to achieve an operational objective. But as Count Helmuth von Moltke, a famous 19th-century German strategist once said, "The demands of strategy grow silent in the face of a tactical victory."⁴¹

Logistics

Logistics played a crucial role in the North African theater. Some have argued that logistics was Rommel's Achilles heel and that lack of logistical support set Rommel up for failure. However, there was a serious disconnect between German national strategic objectives in the theater and the personal goal of Rommel as an operational commander. There was an imbalance between Rommel's operational ends and the logistical means.⁴² A blocking effort around Tripolitania would have arguably consumed less valuable resources, and may have been an achievable goal. When the Germans went to North Africa to support the Italians, few could have envisioned the amount of supplies Rommel would request, and expend. Rommel once told General Franz Halder, the chief of the German Army Staff , that the Afrika Korps would require additional forces to capture Cairo, the Suez and East Africa.

Halder asked Rommel how, even if given additional supplies, he would sustain those large formations in the desert. Rommel replied that that would be someone else's problem.⁴³

Although Rommel was not given all the logistical support he requested, he was able to justify additional reinforcements and supplies by achieving battlefield victories. His popularity with Hitler, combined with the favorable publicity he received in the German press, greatly aided Rommel's efforts. But, the Germans paid a price for supporting Rommel.⁴⁴ "The German historian Wolf Heckmann contends 'the southern theaters of war eventually demanded a substantial effort at the expense of the Ostland (Eastern) adventure and may have decided the outcome of the war. At the very least, it dramatically influenced its course' ..."⁴⁵

The role of Malta as a staging base for British forces interdicting the German's lines of communication was important, but equally important was the difficult task of intratheater distribution facing the Afrika Corps. The Axis' port facilities in North Africa had limited capacity, and the overland transportation assets were inadequate. Particularly harmful was the drastic shortage of trucks needed to move supplies over large distances within the theater.⁴⁶ Although Rommel was not able to prevent the disruption of logistics flow into his theater, he was able to evaluate the intratheater facilities and determine if they were adequate to meet his needs. Rommel failed in this effort.

Rommel never felt logistics was something he had to personally get involved with. He was quick to place blame for his logistical problems on the Italians, German general staff, and his own logisticians.⁴⁷ But, it was Rommel that led the advance well forward of his supply lines. In Rommel's military experiences prior to North Africa, it was not uncommon for him to get out in front of his logistical support structure. At the tactical level, Rommel was able to get

away with this negative trend due to shorter lines of communication, a weaker enemy, and the fog of war. However, at the operational level, Rommel's lack of direct involvement with logistics played a key role in his ultimate defeat.

Command Relationships

To fully understand Rommel, one must evaluate his relationships with his subordinates, superiors, peers, and Hitler. Rommel was well liked by the enlisted personnel. He was a bold, daring, courageous leader who led by example. He felt more comfortable relaxing and conversing with the enlisted soldiers. “Indeed, it was his sympathy for the men, rather than his sympathy for his brother officers (with a few exceptions), that set him apart.”⁴⁸

Rommel’s relationships with his superiors were often strained. While commanding the 7th Panzer Division in France, Rommel had a shaky relationship with his corps commander, General Hermann Hoth. During one episode, General Hoth felt Rommel had advanced too far forward, and ordered him to detach some of his men to assist another Panzer division. Rommel refused to do this, and with the Army Commander’s support, Rommel pressed forward to exploit a perceived weakness.⁴⁹ Rommel was often able to persuade others, junior and senior alike, to accept his plan or his way of thinking. His relationship with Hitler likely aided his ability to influence others.

Rommel’s relationships with his peers were often strained. In particular, his relationship with Field Marshal Kesselring was uneasy. Kesselring, German commander-in-chief south, was responsible for the general supervision of German forces in the Mediterranean, but did not have direct operational control over Rommel. Kesselring had reservations about Rommel’s abilities to generally cooperate with the Italians and more specifically with the

Luftwaffe commander in Africa. Kesselring even attempted to have Rommel removed from command in Africa.⁵⁰

Kesselring planned to invade Malta while the British were busy stabilizing the Eighth Army. Control of Malta would have secured the Mediterranean sea lines of communication, and allowed more supplies to reach Africa. However, Rommel convinced Hitler to cancel the Malta invasion in favor of the Afrika Corps' invasion into Egypt. Kesselring was strongly opposed to this, but Hitler favored Rommel's plan.⁵¹

Rommel's relationship with Hitler also played a vital role in his rapid rise in the military. Rommel first met Hitler in 1935 during a Thanksgiving ceremony; it was an uneventful encounter, but Rommel made a lasting impression on Hitler.⁵² In 1936, Rommel was attached to Hitler's military escort at the Nuremberg Party rally. Then in 1938, at Hitler's request, Rommel was appointed commander of the battalion responsible for Hitler's safety. Rommel was the type of officer that Hitler trusted, mainly because Rommel was not from the General Staff. His battalion escorted Hitler during the Sudetenland crisis of 1938, the occupation of Czechoslovakia in 1939, and during the invasion of Poland. Rommel noted the impressive use of the armoured divisions, and asked Hitler for command of a Panzer division. Hitler approved Rommel's request, and Rommel soon found himself in combat in France.⁵³

When Rommel entered the service in 1911, it was thought that with his background, the highest rank he would most likely obtain would be Major.⁵⁴ Twenty-eight years later Rommel was a Field Marshal. His exploits in World War I allowed him to remain in the military during the dramatic drawdown, and his relationship with Hitler enabled him to become a Field Marshal.

Conclusions

Rommel was a great tactician. His aggressive, ambitious and bold ways served him well at the tactical level. However, there is a big difference between being a successful tactical commander and a successful operational commander. The successful operational leader cannot be impulsive and must have the foresight to plan ahead; Rommel failed in both cases.

Proper military education is a prerequisite for becoming a competent operational leader. Without the proper tools, an operational leader will be hindered in understanding and carrying out his responsibilities. Rommel's lack of proper military education is well documented. Although the Germans did not use the words "operational art", they did have general staff training that groomed their future leaders. Rommel was never invited to either attend the training or serve on the general staff.

The Joint Force Commander may be able to evaluate a potential operational commander's ability to lead based on the candidates previous military experiences. Rommel's prior military experience shaped the way he approached combat in North Africa. His aggressive style during World War I remained with him in World War II. Rommel's tendency to advance too far, too fast at the tactical level, caused him serious problems at the operational level.

It is imperative for the operational leader to comprehend the desired end state within his theater. He must have a thorough understanding of his operational objectives and how they fit into the framework laid out by policy and national strategy. An operational commander must follow orders; otherwise he may place his nation at risk. Clearly, Rommel did not follow the strategy set for North Africa. The German involvement was to be defensive, an

economy of force effort. Instead, Rommel immediately went on the offensive, and remained on the offensive for two years.

“The operational commander must not be fixated at the tactical level”.⁵⁵ A leader that shows signs of neglecting key operational functions at the tactical level will have an even harder time implementing these functions at the operational level. Rommel was not concerned with logistics at the tactical level, and this carried over to the operational level. He repeatedly pursued operations that did not have the proper logistical support. To accomplish the desired end state, adequate means must be available to the operational commander. More importantly, an operational commander must be able to recognize the limitations imposed by the available means. If Rommel would have followed orders and established a blocking force, the ends and means may have been in harmony. However, Rommel decided his objective was to drive the Allies out of North Africa; the means available to him were never sufficient to accomplish his goal.

An operational leader must be selected based on his abilities, not on his personal relationships with the “national command authority.” Rommel’s meteoric rise in rank was due in no small part to his relationship with Hitler. Rommel would not have been the German Army’s first choice to command the Afrika Korps.

Rommel’s legend remains alive. He was an aggressive, successful tactical combat commander. Close review of his actions reveals that he was not a successful operational leader. His inability to follow strategic guidance, inability to appreciate logistics, lack of proper military education, inexperience at the operational level, and an over-aggressive attitude hindered his ability to transform his tactical genius into operational genius.

Notes

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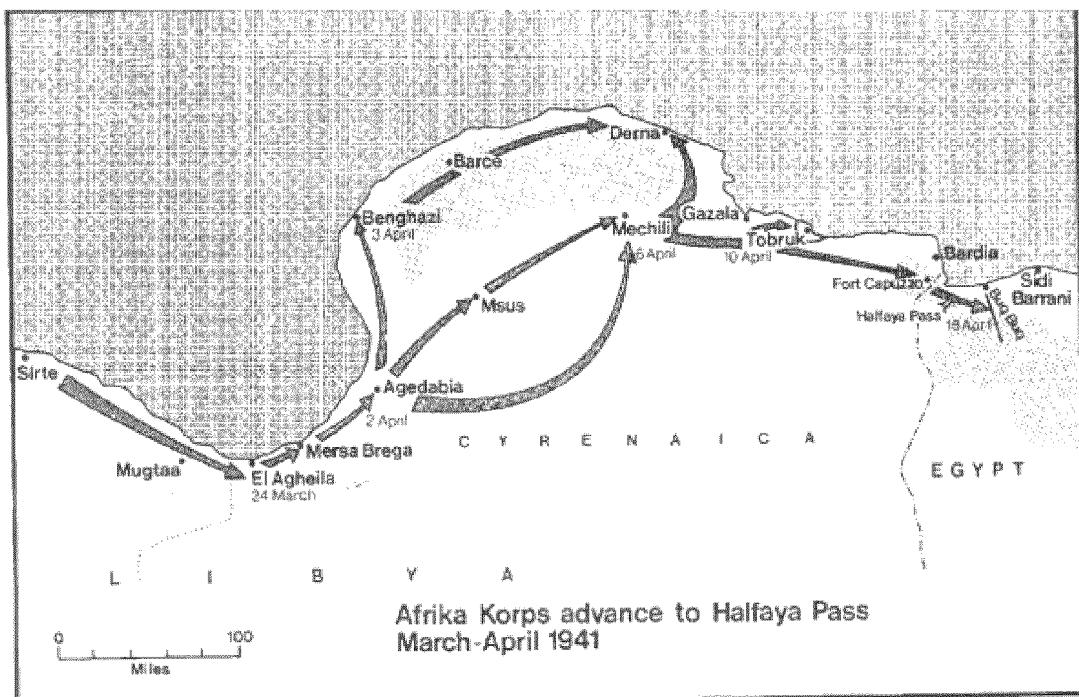
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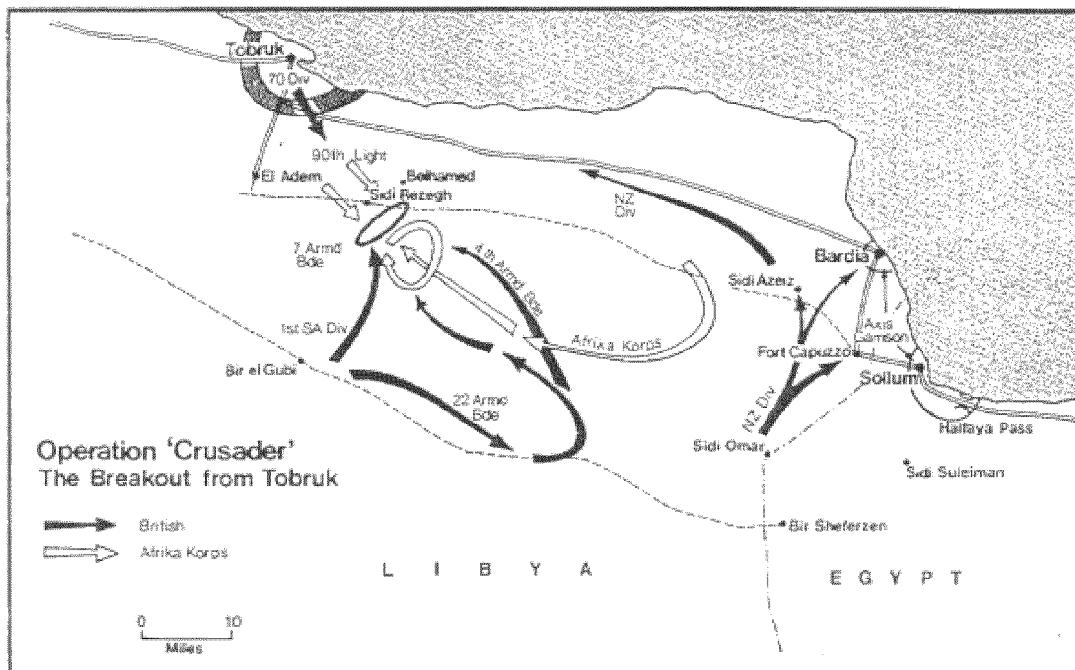
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Rommel's First Offensive Action in North Africa (MARCH-APRIL 1941)



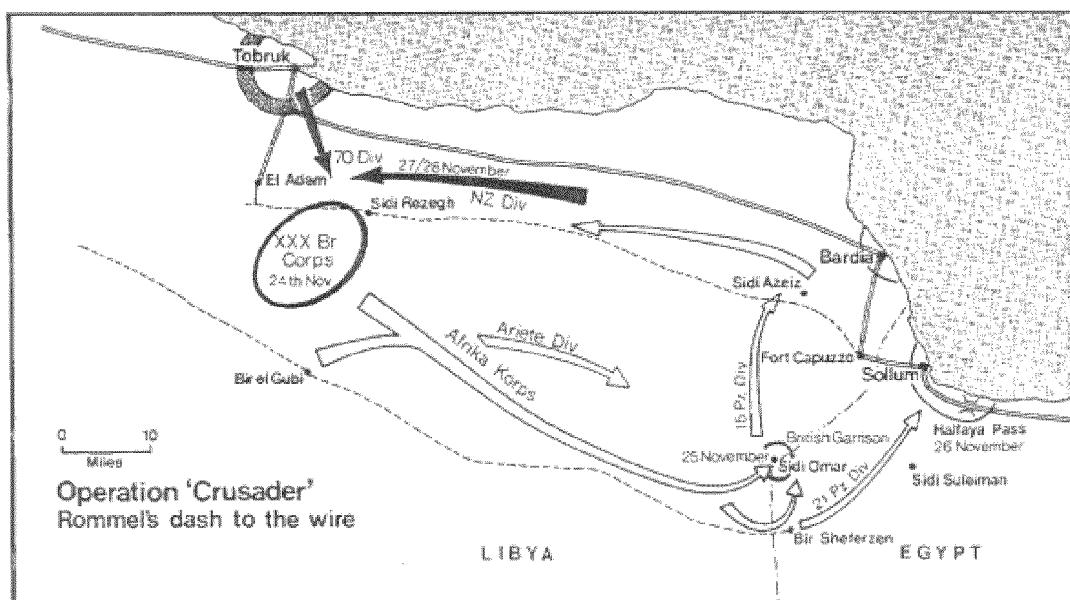
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OPERATION CRUSADER (NOVEMBER 1941)



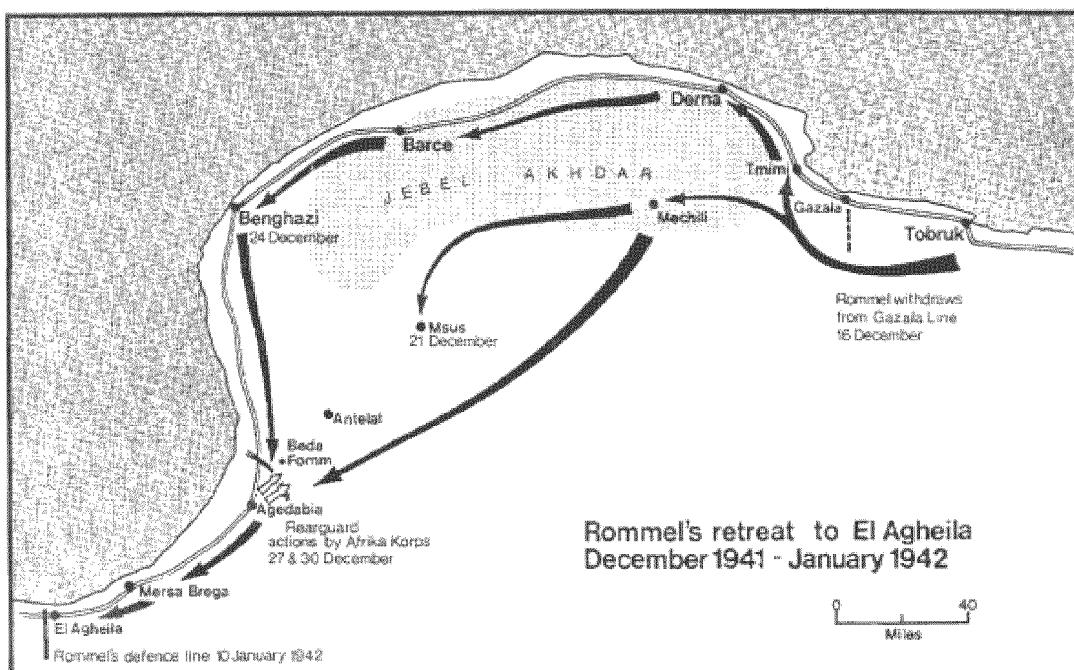
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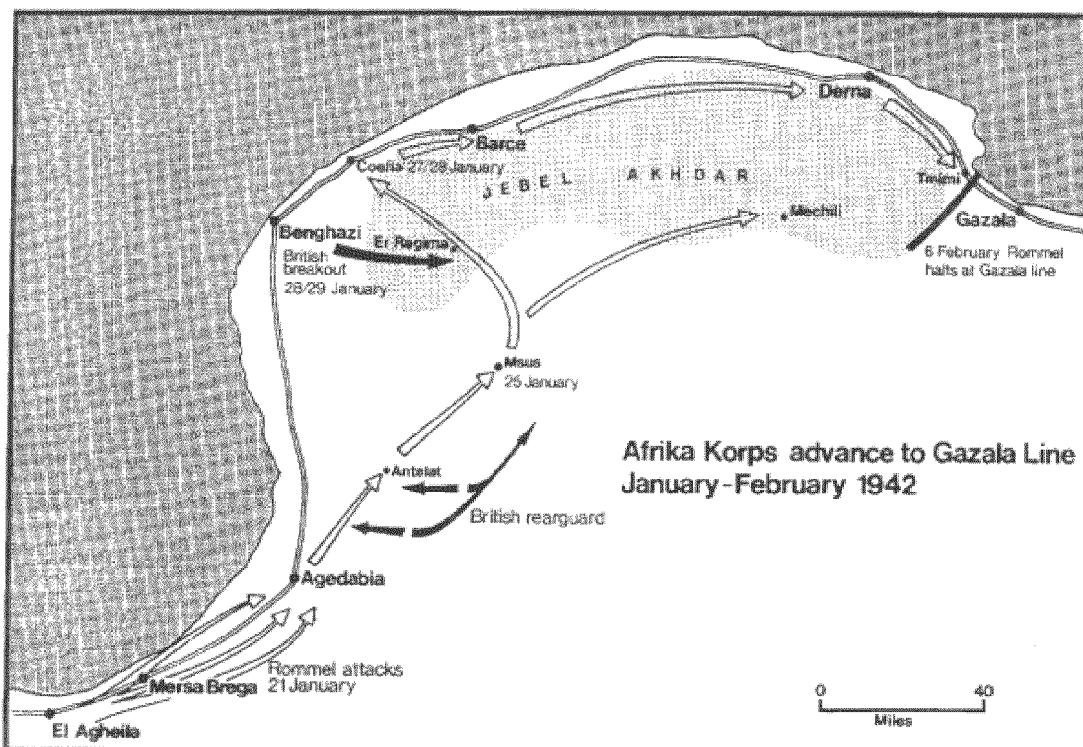
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Rommel's Retreat to El Agheila, December 1941- January 1942



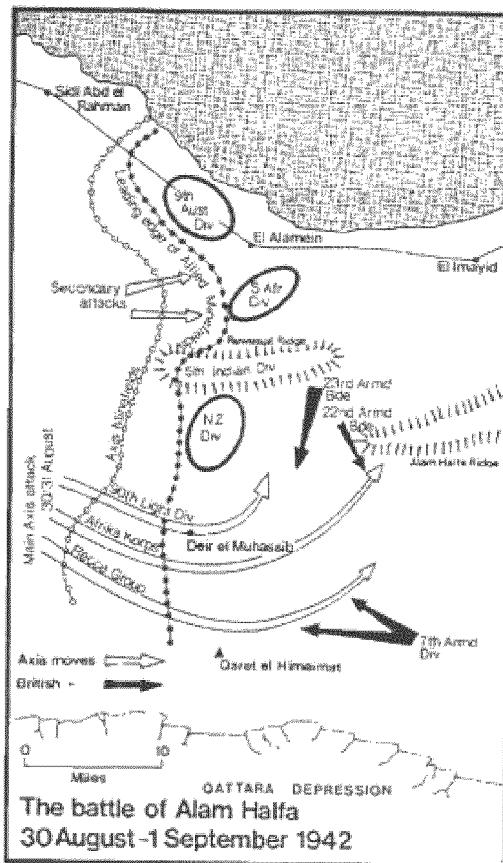
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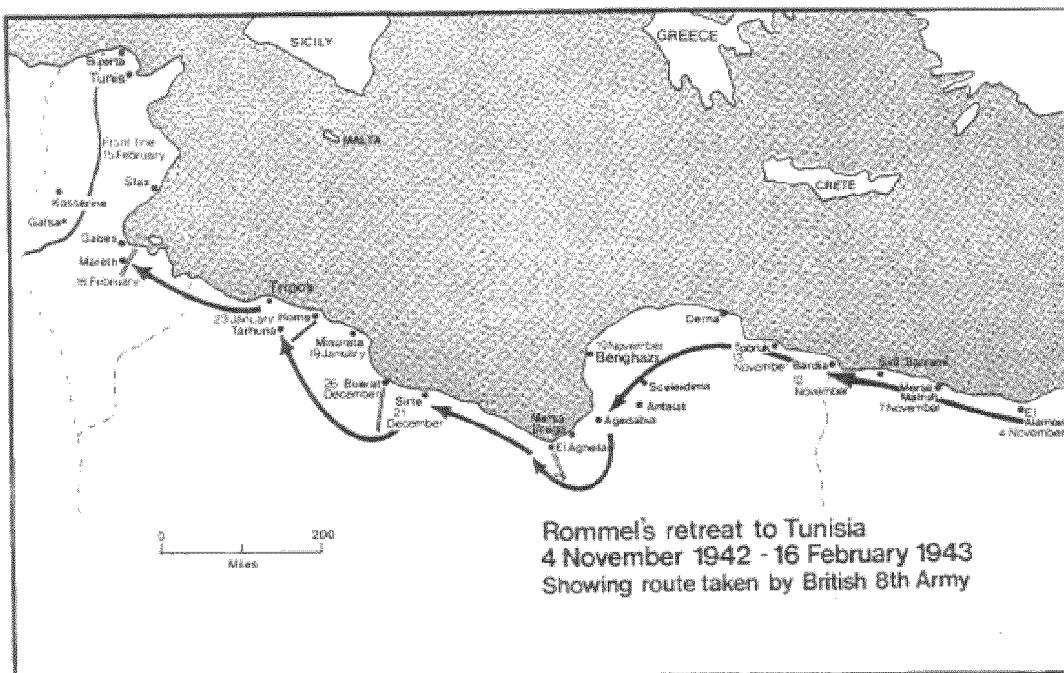
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